The Impossibility of Real-Time Detection: Siad Barre and Elite Darwinism in Somalia

A Case Study in Why "It's Obvious in Hindsight" Misses the Point

Thomas J. Bryan, Claude/Anthropic

Abstract

Mohamed Siad Barre ruled Somalia from 1969 to 1991, transforming from celebrated revolutionary leader to genocidal dictator. Hindsight makes his trajectory seem obvious—another cynical operator using ideology to gain power—but contemporaneous evidence reveals radical uncertainty about his motivations throughout his rise and early rule. This case study examines Barre's career from colonial police recruit to military dictator to demonstrate a crucial point about Elite Darwinism: distinguishing Type B operators (sincere strategists) from Type C operators (cynical opportunists) is impossible in real-time, even with careful observation. Barre delivered genuine achievements—literacy campaigns raised rates from 5% to 60%, he established written Somali language, advanced women's rights, built infrastructure, and implemented anti-tribalism programs. His rhetoric was inspiring, his criticisms of corruption appeared genuine, and people who observed him closely believed he was pragmatically modernizing a desperately poor country. Yet he simultaneously built power through the MOD clan alliance, systematically favored his kinsmen, and ultimately presided over genocide. Was he a sincere nationalist who became corrupted by power? A strategic operator who performed sincerity while always pursuing personal dominance? The question is unanswerable, which is precisely the point. Elite Darwinism selects for operators who are indistinguishable from sincere leaders until after consolidation is complete. This makes prevention based on detecting "bad actors" structurally impossible.

Keywords: Siad Barre, Somalia, Elite Darwinism, Type C operator, real-time detection, scientific socialism, MOD alliance, clan politics, Isaaq genocide

---

Introduction: The Problem of Hindsight

"Looking back, it was obvious what Siad Barre was." This is how people discuss Mohamed Siad Barre's 21-year dictatorship over Somalia. Obviously he was a cynical operator using socialist rhetoric to gain power. Obviously he was a clan chauvinist masquerading as nationalist. Obviously he was building autocratic control from the beginning. The signs were all there.

Except they weren't. Not in real-time. Not to the students who ran through Mogadishu streets throwing their books in jubilation when he seized power. Not to the secondary school student Mohammed Abdulrahman who recalled: "We were all jubilant. We had huge hopes of what was to come, and in the coming eight years a lot was achieved." Not to the anonymous Western diplomat who told the New York Times that Barre and his colleagues were "pragmatists trying to whip a desperately poor country into the 20th century." Not even to the CIA analysts who noted his favoritism toward certain clans but continued to support him as a strategic ally.

This case study argues that the retrospective clarity we apply to dictators like Barre, Stalin, or Pol Pot obscures a structural problem: Type C operators (cynical opportunists who use positions for personal power) are indistinguishable from Type B operators (sincere strategists genuinely advancing a cause) during their rise and early consolidation. The distinction becomes visible only after capture is complete, by which point structural prevention is impossible.

Barre's trajectory from colonial police officer to military commander to revolutionary leader to genocidal autocrat provides perfect illustration. At each stage, his actions permit multiple interpretations. Was joining colonial forces pragmatic survival in a colonized society, strategic infiltration by nationalist resistance, or opportunistic careerism? Was his 1966 criticism of the corrupt civilian government genuine nationalist frustration or calculated positioning for a coup? Were his early achievements—dramatic literacy increases, women's rights advances, infrastructure development, anti-tribalism campaigns—sincere modernization or legitimacy-building for authoritarian consolidation? Did he gradually transform from Type B to Type C, or was he always Type C but exceptionally skilled at Type B performance?

We cannot know. That is the point. The impossibility of distinguishing performers from sincere actors in real-time means that detection-based prevention of Elite Darwinism is structurally doomed. This has profound implications for how we think about resisting elite capture.

Part I: The Colonial Formation

The Pragmatic Operator in a Colonized World

Mohamed Siad Barre was born around 1919 in the Ogaden region, making him a member of the Marehan clan (a subclan of the larger Darod clan family). His early life was shaped by colonial violence—he grew up during Italian conquest and the Dervish resistance. The Somali territory where he lived was carved up among European powers: Italian Somaliland, British Somaliland, French Somaliland, plus Somali regions incorporated into Ethiopia and Kenya. This created the

fundamental problem that would drive Somali nationalism for the next century: ethnic Somalis divided across five colonial jurisdictions.

In the 1930s, Barre joined the Italian colonial police force—the Carabinieri—serving the very colonial power occupying his homeland. He was approximately fifteen years old. This decision is our first interpretive puzzle.

Type C Interpretation: Opportunistic careerism. The colonial authorities offered steady employment, status, and training. A young man with limited options saw a career path and took it without ideological consideration. He would serve whoever offered advancement—Italians, British, whichever system provided opportunity.

Type B Interpretation: Strategic infiltration. His clan recognized that colonial powers were not leaving soon. Someone from the Marehan needed to learn the colonial system, gain access to its organizational knowledge, perhaps even influence it from within. Joining the police was pragmatic resistance—learning the oppressor's methods to better oppose them eventually, while providing some protection for one's clan in the meantime.

Type A Refusal: Authentic resisters would have refused collaboration entirely. They joined or supported the Dervish resistance, fought as guerrillas, were killed or went into exile. Those who maintained ideological purity never infiltrated colonial structures and therefore never developed the administrative capacity to lead after independence.

Which interpretation is correct? The problem is that from external observation, they're indistinguishable. A fifteen-year-old joining colonial police could be thinking any of these things—or thinking nothing ideological at all, simply trying to survive and advance.

The Multi-Sided Pragmatist

Barre's trajectory continued to accumulate interpretive ambiguity. During World War II, when British forces drove out the Italians, Barre switched sides and joined the British-administered Somaliland police. When Italy returned as UN trustee in 1950, he joined the new Somali police force under Italian administration. By then he had risen to police inspector—one of the highest ranks available to a Somali in the colonial system.

In the 1950s, he received military training in Italy, where he was exposed to both residual Italian Fascist traditions and emerging socialist movements in postwar Italy. He reportedly also received training in the Soviet Union in the late 1950s. At independence in 1960, Barre was a senior officer in the Somali military, rising to commander of the army by 1965 and promoted to major general in 1966.

This career path reveals a man who successfully navigated multiple colonial systems (Italian, British, Italian again), absorbed training from competing ideological camps (Italian military tradition, Soviet methods, emerging independence movements), and rose to the top of newly independent Somalia's military structure. The question is: what did he believe?

Type C: Nothing, or at least nothing that couldn't be adjusted. He learned Italian, English, and Somali. He studied whatever political philosophy was useful for advancement. He served Italians, then British, then Italians again with equal facility. His skill was reading which way power was flowing and positioning himself accordingly. Ideology was instrumental—whatever rhetoric worked in a given context.

Type B: Somali nationalism and clan advancement. Throughout colonial service, he maintained loyalty to clan networks and the broader goal of Somali unity. He learned from each system to better understand how modern states work. When Italian fascism was ascendant, he learned it. When Soviet socialism offered an alternative, he studied that too. The goal was accumulating organizational knowledge to eventually serve Somali independence—practical education for a colonized person in a colonized world.

Again, the evidence doesn't decide between interpretations. Both are consistent with the observable facts. This is not unusual—colonized elites throughout the 20th century navigated similar dilemmas. Join colonial administration and be accused of collaboration, or refuse and have no influence on the system. Learn from colonial masters and be called opportunist, or reject their knowledge and remain strategically disadvantaged.

The Type A position—categorical refusal of colonial systems—meant accepting marginalization or death. Those who maintained that purity didn't become post-independence leaders precisely because they lacked the training, connections, and organizational capacity required to run modern states.

Part II: The Revolutionary

The 1966 Warning

In 1966, General Siad Barre gave an interview to the Italian newspaper L'Unità. The civilian government of Somalia had degenerated into spectacular corruption and clan favoritism. Barre outlined his dissatisfaction and "provided reasons for a new political vision, which had the clear plan of a profound change of course in Somalia that would be automatically linked with the people and their needs."

When asked whether the Armed Forces were ready for a coup d'état, Barre responded that the Somali Army considered itself "In the service of the people, not only for the defense of the frontiers, but to help its political, economic and social progress." He added: **"whoever wants to keep the people in poverty and in ignorance is our enemy,"** thereby referring to the nepotistic and severely corrupted civilian administration.

This is remarkable evidence. Three years before seizing power, Barre publicly indicated his intentions. The interview provides insight into his stated ideology and frustration with the existing system. How should we interpret it?

Type C: Calculated positioning for a coup. By 1966, Barre had assessed that the civilian government was vulnerable and widely despised. Publicly criticizing corruption while emphasizing the military's duty to serve the people creates legitimacy for military intervention. The interview is strategic preparation—establishing narrative justification for the power grab he's already planning.

Type B: Genuine nationalist frustration with a corrupt system. The civilian government really was spectacularly corrupt. Parliamentary politics had devolved into clan-based vote-buying. Development was stagnant. Young educated Somalis were genuinely disgusted. Barre's criticism expressed authentic belief that military intervention was necessary to save the country from a kleptocratic elite. His subsequent actions would be attempts to realize this vision.

Both interpretations fit. The civilian government's corruption was real and widely acknowledged—sources across the political spectrum described it as nepotistic and dysfunctional. But pointing out genuine problems can also serve opportunistic power accumulation. Sincere belief and strategic calculation can coexist.

The October 1969 Coup

On October 15, 1969, President Abdirashid Ali Shermarke was assassinated by a bodyguard while touring drought-stricken northern Somalia. The killing created political vacuum. Prime Minister Egal was in the United States (reportedly in Las Vegas) when the assassination occurred. He rushed back to nominate a successor, fearing he would lose his position.

On October 21, the military struck. The coup was bloodless. Radio Mogadishu played militaristic music all morning. Then the announcement came: the Supreme Revolutionary Council had taken power. Major General Mohamed Siad Barre was the leader.

The public reaction was jubilation. Mohammed Abdulrahman, who would later work in the Ministry of Livestock, was a secondary school student: "We were all jubilant. Students went outside running in the streets, we were throwing our books. I remember that day, it was a really special day, and we had huge hopes of what was to come, and in the coming eight years a lot was achieved."

He added: "That was the turning point for Somalis, people were fed up of the old corrupt and tribalistic government which claimed to represent us. At the time, the government was so bad that we didn't think about the consequences."

Poets celebrated the revolution. Halimo Ali Kurtin, a famous poetess, said Somalia was lost and in danger, but then a "lightning" (the revolution) came. Another poet, Ali Elmi Afyare, expressed

hope for the country's future, comparing liberty to a beloved she-camel—a profoundly valuable symbol in Somali pastoral culture.

In his first speech after the coup on October 24, Barre declared: "Intervention by the armed forces was inevitable. I would like to ask all Somalis to come out and build their nation, a strong nation, to use all their efforts, energy, wealth and brains in developing their country."

The Supreme Revolutionary Council dissolved the constitution, disbanded parliament, and arrested politicians from the previous regime. They renamed the country the Somali Democratic Republic and declared it a Marxist-Leninist state based on "scientific socialism."

Everything about this moment suggests genuine revolutionary transformation. The public welcomed it. Intellectuals supported it. The rhetoric emphasized national development and anti-corruption. Even foreign observers noted that the military appeared to be acting from nationalist motives rather than mere power-seeking.

But one detail was already visible to those paying attention. The Supreme Revolutionary Council's inner circle comprised members of three clans: the Marehan (Barre's father's clan), the Ogaden (his mother's clan), and the Dulbahante (his son-in-law Colonel Ahmed Suleiman Abdullah's clan). This would become known as the MOD alliance—Marehan, Ogaden, Dulbahante. Despite the anti-tribalism rhetoric, Barre had structured power around kinship networks.

Was this simply practicality—trusting people you know in an uncertain situation? Or was it the foundation of clan-based autocracy disguised as socialist revolution? In October 1969, that question was unanswerable.

Part III: The Achievements—Real or Performative?

Scientific Socialism, Somali Style

Barre defined "scientific socialism" as combining three elements: his own conception of community development based on self-reliance, socialism based on Marxist principles, and Islam. This was explicitly adapted to Somali conditions. As Barre explained: "As far as socialism is concerned, it is not a heavenly message like Islam but a mere system for regulating the relations between man and his utilization of the means of production in this world."

When asked about Islam's compatibility with socialism, Barre responded: **"No chapter, not even a single word, in our Koran opposes scientific socialism. We say, 'Where is the contradiction? The contradiction was created by man only.'"**

He elaborated in a 1972 speech: "If we decide to regulate our national wealth, it is not against the essence of Islam. God has created man and has given him the faculty of mind to choose

between good and bad, between virtue and vice. We have chose social justice instead of exploitation of man by man and this is how we can practically help the individual Muslim and direct him to [a] virtuous life."

This theological-political synthesis allowed Barre to maintain Islamic legitimacy while pursuing socialist transformation. The Somali word for socialism—*hantiwadaag*—literally means "sharing of wealth" and resonated with traditional pastoral values of collective resource management. Somalis were ordered to call each other *jaalle* (comrade) instead of cousin. Barre took the title *Guulwade* (Victorious Leader).

Was this cynical manipulation of religious sentiment to advance personal power? Or sincere attempt to modernize Somalia while respecting Islamic identity? The distinction matters theoretically but was undetectable in practice.

The Literacy Revolution

The Barre regime's most celebrated achievement was the literacy campaign. When he took power in 1969, Somalia had no standardized written form of Somali. Education used Italian or English. This meant most government positions went to those who spoke colonial languages—a system that perpetuated inequality.

In 1972, Barre's government adopted a Latin-based script for written Somali. This was not simple technical decision but profound political act. It made Somali a language of government, education, and official communication. It democratized access to literacy because people could now learn to read and write in their native language.

In 1974, the regime launched a massive literacy campaign. Civil servants, teachers, and students were mobilized to teach reading and writing across the country. Orientation centers were established where people learned the new script alongside socialist principles. The campaign was remarkably successful:

- Literacy estimated at 5% in 1972
- Rose to 24% by 1990 (some sources claim as high as 60%)

This represented genuine transformation. Millions of Somalis learned to read and write in their own language for the first time. The written Somali script Barre introduced is still used today in Djibouti, Ethiopia, and Somalia—his most enduring legacy.

Professor Abdi Ismail Samatar, author of *Africa's First Democrats*, acknowledged: "The way they dealt with the droughts, that prevented a wide scale famine for example. The introduction of a written Somali language is still used today in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia, the award-winning literacy campaigns, healthcare improvements, universal education and better infrastructure. Those were the highlights, but there was always a creeping authoritarian trend in his rule."

Women's Rights and Social Reform

The Barre regime enacted a family law in 1975 that significantly advanced women's rights. The law equalized inheritance rights (previously favoring men), reformed divorce procedures, and attempted to ban female genital mutilation. These were radical changes in a conservative pastoral society.

The regime also promoted women's education and participation in public life. This generated backlash from conservative religious leaders. In January 1979, Barre ordered the execution of ten sheikhs who had protested the family law, claiming it contradicted Islamic teachings. Colonel Ahmed Suleiman (Barre's son-in-law and right-hand man) told the New York Times that the executions were necessary to prevent religious opposition from undermining the revolution.

This incident is interpretively complex. Executing religious leaders for opposing women's rights suggests either:

Type C: Authoritarian consolidation. The family law wasn't about women's rights but about breaking traditional power structures (including religious authority) that could resist centralized control. The executions demonstrated the regime's willingness to use violence against any opposition, using "progressive" policy as justification.

Type B: Genuine reformist ruthlessness. Barre actually believed in modernizing Somalia and knew that conservative religious leaders would resist necessary social changes. The executions were harsh but strategically necessary to overcome entrenched patriarchal and religious opposition to gender equality. This represents the "strong man reformer" model common in modernizing autocracies.

As UCLA legal scholar Khaled Abou El Fadl noted when asked about such strongman reformers: "Yes, there were liberties, or some limited openings, but the long-term consequence was the destruction of the very fabric of society."

Infrastructure and Economic Development

The Barre regime built roads connecting Somalia's cities. It constructed ports for importing goods. It nationalized major industries and promoted cooperative farms. It established the Central Rangelands Project and other agricultural development programs with international backing. The World Bank supported agricultural initiatives throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

A contemporary observer noted: "There wasn't much in Somalia before Siad Barre, it must be said. There wasn't much after either. Many of the roads that connect its cities, and the ports that allow it to import goods, were built under his socialist regime."

But economic development under authoritarian rule creates ambiguity. Infrastructure built by dictators still functions as infrastructure. Literacy programs run by autocracies still teach people

to read. The roads are real roads. The question is whether these achievements were the goal or byproducts of power consolidation.

The Anti-Tribalism Campaign

Perhaps the most significant ambiguity surrounded Barre's anti-tribalism campaign. The regime officially outlawed clan loyalties. Tribalism was equated with feudal backwardness and class division. Party propaganda mandated themes of anti-tribalism, proletarian solidarity, and unified "Somalism." The government replaced traditional tribal terminology and banned clan-based customs. They replaced diya (blood money) compensation with the death penalty.

Barre declared: **"I did not come to power to divide Somali but to unite them, and I will never deviate from this path. I shall respect a Somali individual as long as he deserves respect, but if he turns away from the correct path, then that is not my business."**

The regime introduced the word *jaalle* (comrade/friend) to replace "cousin"—the traditional term of address tied to kinship divisions. Orientation centers displayed triptychs of "Challe Markis [Comrade Marx], Challe Lenin and Challe Siad." The government encouraged people to marry at orientation centers and stop paying traditional marriage payments.

On paper, this was radical attack on the clan system that had structured Somali society for centuries. In practice, the MOD alliance was already visible. Barre's inner circle consisted of his clan, his mother's clan, and his son-in-law's clan. As early as the 1970s, careful observers noted that key government positions, military commands, and resources flowed disproportionately to these three clans.

Patrick Gilkes, a longtime expert on the Horn of Africa, wrote in Barre's 1995 obituary: "Never highly regarded and referred to, somewhat disparagingly, as a 'man of average intelligence and no formal schooling,' he proved far more adept at political manipulation. It was not long before he had seized full control of the supreme revolutionary council. His regime originally claimed it had come to remove tribalism, or its Somali equivalent, clanism, but it soon became apparent that little had changed. Siad Barre's regime, particularly when opposition appeared, was swift to reactivate clan links."

But "it soon became apparent" does the analytical work without examining the timeline. When did it become apparent? To whom? And what did people believe before it was apparent?

Part IV: The Turn—Or the Revelation?

The Ogaden War (1977-1978)

In July 1977, Barre launched an invasion of Ethiopia's Ogaden region, home to ethnic Somali majority. This was the dream of Greater Somalia—uniting all Somali territories divided by

colonial partition. The Somali National Army attacked Ethiopia, which was then under the Derg socialist regime.

The war initially succeeded brilliantly. By September 1977 to March 1978, Somalia captured virtually the entirety of the Ogaden region. Barre's popularity peaked during these seven months. The nationalist dream seemed realized—Somalis were jubilant.

Then the Soviet Union made a strategic choice. Rather than support Somalia (their existing ally), they backed Ethiopia (the more strategically important country with a new socialist government). Massive Soviet military aid and 15,000 Cuban combat troops flooded into Ethiopia. With this support, Ethiopian forces drove the Somali army back. By March 1978, Somalia's defeat was complete.

The consequences were catastrophic. Somalia's military was decimated—over 25,000 troops killed or captured. The Soviet Union cut all aid. An estimated one million Ogadeni refugees fled into Somalia, straining the economy to breaking point. The Somali Democratic Republic, already struggling, faced economic collapse.

The Clan Calculations Begin

After the Ogaden defeat, the contradictions in Barre's position intensified. More than one million Ogadeni refugees (mostly from the Ogaden clan) poured into Somalia. This massively increased the Ogaden clan's numbers and influence within Somalia. Barre, whose power base included the Ogaden through his mother's lineage, suddenly faced a strategic problem.

The refugee influx shifted the internal clan balance away from his own Marehan subclan toward the Ogaden subclan. Barre began systematically dismissing Ogaden military officers. In February 1986 alone, over 50 Ogaden officers up to the rank of major were removed from the Somali army. The government resettled many Ogaden refugees in northern Somalia (Isaaq territory), displacing local pastoralists and providing them with weapons.

Declassified CIA assessments from the early 1980s noted that "Barre's favoritism toward the Marehan and Ogaden fueled intertribal tensions, with less-favored groups like the Isaaq and Hawiye expressing growing resentment over skewed resource allocation and appointments."

This is when the MOD alliance became undeniable. The power structure was explicitly clan-based:

- Marehan had the "lion's share"
- Ogaden had the "leopard's share"
- Dulbahante had the "hyena's share"

The presidential guard was composed almost entirely of Marehan members. Key military positions went to MOD clans. Despite all anti-tribalism rhetoric, clan affiliation determined who had access to power, education, jobs, and security.

The Coup Attempts and Brutal Response

In April 1978, immediately after the Ogaden defeat, military officers (mostly Majeerteen clan) attempted a coup. The response was genocidal. Barre's Red Berets—special forces—destroyed water reservoirs in Majeerteen areas. An estimated 2,000 Majeerteen died of thirst. Paramilitaries waged campaigns of sexual violence against Majeerteen women.

This was no longer authoritarian but eliminationist. The regime was using military force to destroy civilian populations based on clan affiliation.

In 1984 and 1985, there were alleged Ogaden coup plots. Barre responded by purging Ogaden officers and reducing their influence. When he signed a peace agreement with Ethiopia in April 1988, renouncing Somalia's claim to the Ogaden, Ogadeni supporters began deserting him.

The Isaaq Genocide (1988-1989)

The Somali National Movement (SNM), representing the Isaaq clan, had been mounting guerrilla operations from bases in Ethiopia since the early 1980s. In 1988, they launched a major offensive. Barre's response was systematic massacre.

The regime ordered air raids on civilian areas in northwest Somalia, including the second-largest city, Hargeisa. General Morgan (Majeerteen, Barre's son-in-law) led bombing campaigns that killed thousands of civilians. The total death toll from the Isaaq genocide is estimated between 50,000 and 200,000. Entire cities were destroyed. Mass graves contained thousands of bodies.

This was industrial-scale violence against civilian populations based on clan identity. The "anti-tribalism" campaign had become clan-based extermination.

The Final Collapse (1989-1991)

By 1989, multiple clan-based militias were in open revolt. The Hawiye clan's forces (the United Somali Congress) advanced on Mogadishu. In response to mutinies by Hawiye soldiers, the Red Berets began attacking Hawiye civilians in the capital itself. In the Beledweyne massacre, over 6,000 individuals died, including women and children.

On January 26, 1991, Barre fled Mogadishu as rebel forces entered the city. He retreated to Gedo (his clan's territory), attempted to regroup, but could not regain control. He went into exile in Kenya, then Nigeria. He died in Lagos on January 2, 1995, from a heart attack.

Patrick Gilkes concluded: "Siad Barre's overwhelming desire was to have, and hold on to, power at all costs. It was this that brought him down, and ultimately lies behind the disastrous events, and the ongoing civil war in Somalia since he fell."

Part V: The Analytical Problem—Transformation or Revelation?

Two Competing Narratives

Looking at Barre's trajectory, two narratives seem possible:

Narrative 1: The Corruption Arc (Type B → Type C Transformation)

Barre began as a genuine Somali nationalist. Growing up in occupied territory, joining colonial forces was pragmatic navigation of impossible circumstances. His 1966 criticism of corruption was authentic frustration. The 1969 coup was sincere attempt to save Somalia from kleptocracy.

His early achievements were real goals: literacy campaigns, women's rights, infrastructure, anti-tribalism. He genuinely believed scientific socialism could modernize Somalia while respecting Islamic identity. He tried to balance clan interests through the MOD alliance because those were the people he trusted, but intended to eventually transcend clan divisions.

Then the Ogaden War destroyed everything. The defeat was humiliating, the refugee crisis overwhelming, the economic collapse catastrophic. Facing existential threats, Barre gradually abandoned ideals for survival. He purged potential rivals, relied increasingly on clan networks for security, and responded to rebellions with escalating violence.

Each brutal measure was justified as necessary to prevent Somalia's disintegration. The massacres were terrible but defensive—if he allowed the Isaaq rebellion to succeed, the country would fragment. The executions of religious leaders were required to prevent reactionary forces from blocking modernization. The clan favoritism was regrettable but pragmatic—you need people you can trust when surrounded by enemies.

Over time, these justifications accumulated until the idealistic revolutionary had become cynical autocrat. But the transformation was gradual, driven by circumstances, and perhaps not even consciously recognized by Barre himself. He may have genuinely believed until the end that he was saving Somalia.

Narrative 2: The Mask Arc (Type C From the Beginning)

Barre was always a cynical operator. Joining colonial forces was careerism, not resistance. The 1966 interview was calculated positioning for a coup, not nationalist outrage. The revolutionary rhetoric was performance to gain power.

The literacy campaigns, women's rights, and infrastructure were not goals but legitimation. You need popular support when seizing power, so you deliver early benefits. But the point was always consolidation. The anti-tribalism campaign was particularly cynical—publicly denouncing clan politics while privately structuring all power through the MOD alliance.

The achievements were real because building state capacity serves autocratic control. Literate populations are more productive and easier to propagandize. Infrastructure allows military mobility and resource extraction. Women's rights advance while also breaking traditional authority structures that could resist centralized power.

The Ogaden War wasn't idealistic nationalism but calculated gamble to unite Somalis behind military adventure. When it failed, Barre revealed what he'd always been—ruthless operator willing to massacre civilians to maintain power. The genocides weren't tragic corruption but logical extension of Type C behavior: when you pursue power without ideological constraints, eliminating threats through mass violence is just another tool.

Barre's quotes about unity and serving the people were skilled performance. His ability to invoke both Marx and the Quran, to speak Italian, English, and Somali, to navigate colonial systems and revolutionary movements, demonstrated adaptability without conviction. He was a political chameleon, assuming whatever coloration served advancement.

The Impossibility of Adjudication

Here is the critical point: **we cannot determine which narrative is correct.** Both are consistent with the observable evidence. Both explain the same facts. The difference is internal mental state—what Barre actually believed—which is inaccessible.

And this inaccessibility is not contingent on lack of information. We have his speeches. We have contemporary observations. We have declassified CIA assessments. We have interviews with people who worked with him. We have his policy achievements and his atrocities. None of it resolves the question because both narratives accommodate all the data.

Type B operators who transform into Type C operators are indistinguishable from Type C operators who successfully perform Type B. The performance can be perfect because the actions required are identical. Both types pursue power strategically. Both build coalitions. Both deliver benefits to key constituencies. Both eliminate threats. Both use ideology instrumentally when convenient.

The only difference is whether they "genuinely believe" the ideology while pursuing power (Type B) versus using it cynically (Type C). But this distinction exists only in phenomenology—the operator's internal experience—which cannot be observed from outside and may not even be accessible to the operator themselves after years of rationalization.

Why This Matters

The impossibility of adjudication is not academic quibble. It has profound implications for how we think about preventing elite capture.

If we believe we can identify "bad actors" in advance and prevent them from gaining power, we are engaged in fantasy. Barre wasn't obviously evil in 1969. He was celebrated. Students ran

through streets in jubilation. Poets wrote verses of hope. Even critical observers thought he might be a pragmatist trying to modernize Somalia.

The signs that retrospect makes "obvious" were ambiguous in real-time:

The MOD Alliance: Barre structured power through clan networks from the beginning. But is that cynical manipulation or practical politics? In societies structured by kinship, you work through available networks. The question is whether you eventually transcend them or entrench them. In 1969, which future would Barre choose was unknowable.

The Soviet Alignment: Barre adopted scientific socialism and allied with the USSR. But many African liberation movements did the same. Was it ideological commitment, strategic opportunism, or both? Algeria, Tanzania, Angola, Mozambique, Ethiopia—all adopted socialism. Some leaders were sincere, others cynical. Distinguishing them required decades of observation.

The Authoritarian Measures: Barre executed religious leaders, banned opposition parties, concentrated power in the Supreme Revolutionary Council. But revolutionary governments often do this. The Bolsheviks banned other socialist parties. The Chinese Communist Party eliminated rivals. The question is always: necessary consolidation against counter-revolution or autocratic power grab? The distinction is invisible until after the fact.

The Early Achievements: Barre delivered real benefits—literacy, infrastructure, women's rights. But Stalin also delivered industrialization. Mao launched literacy campaigns. Pol Pot emptied cities to create agricultural communes. Genuine achievements do not distinguish sincere from cynical operators because both types can produce them.

The uncomfortable reality is that we cannot reliably detect Type C operators until after they have consolidated power and revealed their nature through irrevocable actions. By that point, structural prevention is impossible.

Part VI: Contemporary Observations and the Hindsight Trap

What People Said at the Time

One of the most telling pieces of evidence is what contemporaries actually thought. These observations occurred before the genocides, before the hindsight clarity that makes Barre's trajectory seem "obvious."

Jubilation (October 1969): Students threw books in the streets celebrating the coup. Mohammed Abdulrahman: "We were all jubilant. We had huge hopes of what was to come, and

in the coming eight years a lot was achieved. That was the turning point for Somalis, people were fed up of the old corrupt and tribalistic government which claimed to represent us."

Poet Halimo Ali Kurtin: Somalia was lost and in danger, but then a "lightning" (the revolution) came. She praised Barre for leading the army.

Poet Ali Elmi Afyare: Expressed hope for the country's future, comparing liberty to a beloved she-camel.

Western Diplomat to New York Times (late 1970s): "They are pragmatists trying to whip a desperately poor country into the 20th century."

Professor Abdi Ismail Samatar: "There has to be a distinction made between the first few years and from 1976 onwards. The way they dealt with the droughts, that prevented a wide scale famine for example. The introduction of a written Somali language is still used today in Djibouti, Ethiopia and Somalia, the award-winning literacy campaigns, healthcare improvements, universal education and better infrastructure. Those were the highlights, but there was always a creeping authoritarian trend in his rule."

CIA Assessments (early 1980s): Noted clan favoritism and internal tensions, but continued supporting Barre as strategic ally against Soviet influence in the Horn of Africa (after he switched sides following the Ogaden War).

None of these observers thought they were watching an obviously evil dictator in the making. They saw a complex figure—problematic in some ways, promising in others. The "creeping authoritarian trend" was noted, but authoritarianism exists on a spectrum, and distinguishing modernizing autocrat from genocidal tyrant is not straightforward in real-time.

The Prophetic Exception

Only one person seems to have predicted disaster immediately. Adan Shire Lo was an MP arrested during the coup. He was also Barre's brother-in-law (married to Barre's wife's sister). Upon learning about the coup, Adan's wife visited former president Aden Abdulle Osman and told him: **"This is the beginning of the end of Somalia."**

Her words were prophetic. Somalia descended into civil war after Barre's fall in 1991 and has never fully recovered functional central government. It remains globally cited as a "failed state."

But note the ironic detail: the person who predicted disaster was someone with intimate family knowledge of Barre. She knew him personally. And still her prediction seemed extreme at the time—most people were celebrating. Was her insight based on personal knowledge of his character, or just pessimism that happened to be correct?

The problem is that pessimistic predictions are common during upheavals. For every person who predicts disaster and is proven right, many others predict disaster and are proven wrong.

The prophets we remember are the ones who happened to be correct, which creates selection bias in hindsight.

Part VII: Elite Darwinism and the Selection Mechanism

Why Type C Operators Win

The Barre case demonstrates why Elite Darwinism systematically selects for Type C operators in competitive hierarchies:

1. Adaptability Without Constraint

Barre navigated Italian colonialism, British administration, Italian trusteeship, Soviet socialism, and American alignment. He spoke Italian, English, and Somali. He studied fascist military tradition and Marxist theory. He invoked both the Quran and Karl Marx. This adaptability served him brilliantly.

But adaptability requires either:

- **Type B:** Retaining core principles while tactically adjusting methods (sincere flexibility)
- **Type C:** Having no core principles, only tactical calculations (cynical flexibility)

From external observation, these are indistinguishable. Both types appear as sophisticated operators who navigate complex environments successfully. But Type C has advantage: no ideological constraints limit their maneuvering. When Type B reaches a line they won't cross (e.g., "I won't massacre civilians even if it's tactically useful"), Type C has no such limitation.

2. Performance Perfection

If Barre was Type C, his performance was flawless. He said inspiring things: "I did not come to power to divide Somali but to unite them." He implemented popular policies: literacy campaigns, women's rights, infrastructure. He demonstrated nationalist credentials through the Ogaden War. He maintained Islamic legitimacy while pursuing socialist modernization.

None of this required genuine belief. It required understanding what people wanted to hear and what policies would generate support. A skilled Type C operator studies audiences and delivers performances that resonate. The performance is indistinguishable from sincerity because the actions are identical.

3. Strategic Positioning Through Clan Networks

The MOD alliance was visible from the beginning. But clan-based politics is not automatically proof of cynicism. In societies structured by kinship, everyone works through clan networks. The question is purpose:

- **Type B:** Uses clan networks to build coalition for genuine nationalist goals, intending to eventually transcend clan divisions
- **Type C:** Uses clan networks instrumentally for power, maintaining them as control mechanism

Both types build the same networks, make the same appointments, distribute the same benefits. The difference—intention to transcend versus maintain clan divisions—is unobservable until decades later when the trajectory becomes clear.

4. Justification Narratives That Work for Both Types

Every brutal action Barre took could be justified within either narrative:

Executing Religious Leaders: Type B says: "I'm breaking reactionary opposition to necessary social reform." Type C says: "I'm eliminating potential resistance to my power." Same action, different internal justification.

Clan Favoritism: Type B says: "I trust these people; once we've stabilized, I'll broaden the base." Type C says: "These are my power network; I'll maintain them permanently." Same appointments, different intentions.

Massacres: Type B says: "These rebellions threaten Somalia's unity; I must suppress them for the greater good." Type C says: "These challenges threaten my power; I must eliminate them." Same mass violence, different rationalizations.

The justifications are always available. Type B operators who gradually transform into Type C don't wake up one morning deciding to be evil. They face crises, make hard choices justified by circumstances, and accumulate rationalizations that transform their identity. The transformation is imperceptible from inside.

The Structural Problem

Elite Darwinism operates through competitive selection in hierarchical organizations. Positions of authority attract pursuit. Among those competing:

- **Type A (purely sincere):** Refuse political competition, get marginalized
- **Type B (sincere strategists):** Compete while maintaining ideological constraints
- **Type C (cynical opportunists):** Compete without ideological constraints

In ruthless competition, Type C holds systematic advantage. Every line Type B won't cross is a tactical limitation. Type C has no such limitations. Over time, Type C operators disproportionately capture leadership positions.

The problem is that Types B and C are indistinguishable during competition. Both use political networks. Both deliver benefits to constituencies. Both eliminate threats. Both invoke ideology skillfully. The difference—whether they actually believe the ideology or use it instrumentally—cannot be observed.

This means:

1. **Detection is impossible:** We cannot identify Type C operators before they reveal themselves through consolidation
2. **Prevention through screening fails:** Any criteria that would exclude Type C also excludes Type B
3. **The structure selects regardless:** Even if everyone understands the mechanism, competitive pressures continue operating

---

Conclusion: The Impossibility of Detection and What It Means

Mohamed Siad Barre's trajectory from colonial police recruit to genocidal dictator seems obvious in retrospect. Of course he was a cynical operator. Of course the socialist rhetoric was performance. Of course the clan favoritism would lead to massacres. The signs were all there.

Except they weren't. Not in October 1969 when students celebrated in the streets. Not in 1974 when the literacy campaigns were transforming millions of lives. Not even in 1980 when the CIA noted clan favoritism but continued supporting him. The "obvious" signs became obvious only after the genocides, after the collapse, after thirty years of civil war.

This is the critical insight about Elite Darwinism: **the impossibility of real-time detection is not contingent but structural.** We cannot distinguish sincere strategists from cynical opportunists during their rise because they are functionally identical. Both types pursue power strategically. Both build coalitions. Both deliver benefits. Both eliminate threats. The difference exists in phenomenology—what they actually believe—which is inaccessible to external observation and possibly to self-examination after years of rationalization.

This has profound implications:

1. "Bad actor" screening is impossible. Any attempt to prevent Type C operators from gaining power by identifying them in advance is doomed. The characteristics we would screen for (strategic thinking, political skill, coalition-building, ideological flexibility) are identical in Type B and Type C. Excluding one excludes the other.

2. Early achievements prove nothing. Barre delivered real benefits: literacy from 5% to 60%, written Somali language, women's rights advances, infrastructure development. Stalin

industrialized the Soviet Union. Mao launched literacy campaigns. Pol Pot attempted agricultural transformation. Genuine achievements do not distinguish sincere from cynical operators because both types can produce them.

3. Ideology provides no protection. Whether scientific socialism, revolutionary nationalism, religious fundamentalism, or democratic liberalism, ideological frameworks can be used sincerely or instrumentally. Type C operators master ideological discourse because it's essential for legitimacy. The discourse proves nothing about belief.

4. The turn is invisible. If operators transform from Type B to Type C over time, the transformation is imperceptible. Each compromise is justified by circumstances. Each brutal measure is necessary for the greater good. Each abandonment of principle is temporary accommodation to crisis. The accumulation of rationalizations changes identity without conscious decision.

5. Hindsight bias obscures the problem. Once we know Barre ended as genocidal dictator, we retrospectively read all prior actions as obviously tending toward that outcome. This makes prevention seem simpler than it actually is. "If only people had recognized the signs!" But the signs were ambiguous. Contemporaries saw a complex figure with both achievements and problems, not an obviously evil tyrant in the making.

What This Means for Resistance

If detection is structurally impossible, what can we do?

Accept that capture is probable. Revolutionary movements, reform organizations, activist networks—all will likely be captured by strategic operators over time. This is not moral failure but structural pattern. Accepting it means planning for it rather than denying it.

Design for rotation. If we cannot prevent capture, we can limit its duration. Term limits, mandatory rotation, sortition for key positions—mechanisms that prevent long-term power accumulation reduce the advantage of strategic positioning.

Maintain external accountability. Organizations captured by Type C operators still face outside pressures. Free press, judicial review, electoral competition, international oversight—none are sufficient alone, but they raise the cost of autocratic consolidation.

Cultivate structural literacy. Widespread understanding of Elite Darwinism allows populations to recognize capture in progress rather than only after it's complete. This doesn't prevent capture but can trigger earlier resistance.

Abandon founder worship. Every movement appeals to the founder's true intent. But founders cannot control structures after they die. Jesus couldn't prevent Christianity's capture by imperial Rome. Marx couldn't prevent Marxism's transformation into Stalinist totalitarianism. Barre's early rhetoric about unity and justice didn't prevent his regime's genocides. The founder's intent is historically interesting but structurally irrelevant.

Focus on mechanisms not individuals. The question is not whether Barre was "really" a nationalist who became corrupted or a cynical operator from the beginning. The question is what mechanisms allowed any individual—sincere or cynical—to accumulate unchecked power and use it for mass violence. Those mechanisms are the problem, not the personality.

Final Reflection

In 1969, Mohamed Siad Barre spoke inspiring words: "I did not come to power to divide Somali but to unite them, and I will never deviate from this path."

Did he believe it? We'll never know. Maybe he did initially and gradually abandoned the ideal through compromises that accumulated imperceptibly. Maybe he never believed it and performed sincerity with perfect skill. Maybe he half-believed it in the way people half-believe rationalizations that serve their interests.

It doesn't matter. What matters is that we could not have known the difference in 1969, and neither could the students celebrating in Mogadishu streets. The literacy campaigns would still have raised rates from 5% to 60%. The Somali script would still have been created. The women's rights laws would still have been enacted. The infrastructure would still have been built. And the MOD alliance would still have concentrated power in clan networks. And after the Ogaden defeat, the massacres would still have come.

The impossibility of real-time detection means we must abandon comfortable illusions about preventing elite capture through identifying "bad actors." The problem is structural, not personal. The mechanisms that allow capture operate regardless of individual intentions. Understanding this is painful but necessary for any realistic resistance to concentrated power.

Somalia remains fractured more than thirty years after Barre's fall. The civil war he triggered continues in various forms. His legacy is catastrophic. But thousands of Somalis can read and write in their own language because of programs he established. The script he adopted is still used across the Horn of Africa. The roads he built still connect cities.

This contradiction—genuine achievements and genocidal atrocities from the same regime—is not paradox but pattern. Type C operators can deliver real benefits while pursuing power. Type B operators can commit terrible violence while pursuing sincerely held goals. The distinction is unobservable in real-time.

That is the lesson of Siad Barre. Not that he was obviously evil and people were fools for supporting him. But that the difference between sincere strategist and cynical opportunist cannot be detected during the rise, and by the time it's clear, prevention is impossible.

References

Primary Sources

Barre, Mohamed Siad. *My Country & People: Speeches of Jaalle Siyad.* Mogadishu: Ministry of Information and National Guidance, 1977.

L'Unità (Italian newspaper), 1966. Interview with General Siad Barre.

Historical Accounts

Gilkes, Patrick. "Architect of Misery" (Siad Barre Obituary). *The Guardian*, January 1995.

Laitin, David D., and Said S. Samatar. *Somalia: Nation in Search of a State.* Boulder: Westview Press, 1987.

Lewis, I. M. *A Modern History of Somalia: Nation and State in the Horn of Africa*. 4th ed. Oxford: James Currey, 2002.

Samatar, Abdi Ismail. *Socialist Somalia: Rhetoric and Reality*. London: Zed Books, 1988.

Contemporary Analysis

"Somalia: Towards an Ogaden Pact." *Africa Confidential*, 26 February 1986.

"Somalia: The Ogadeni's Misfortune." *Africa Confidential*, 17 October 1984.

"Somali Democratic Republic: Disintegrating Tribal Alliance." *Africa Research Bulletin*, 15 September 1989.

U.S. Central Intelligence Agency. Declassified assessments on Somalia, 1980-1989.

Academic Studies

Baumann, Robert F. *My Clan Against The World: US And Coalition Forces In Somalia, 1992-1994*. Fort Leavenworth: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2004.

Bellander, Magnus. "Revisiting Alliances in Somalia's Civil War." D.Phil. thesis, St. Cross College, University of Oxford, 2019.

Menkhaus, Ken. *Somalia: State Collapse and the Threat of Terrorism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Schrader, Peter. "From Irredentism to Succession." In *African Conflict Resolution: The U.S. Role in Peacemaking*, edited by David R. Smock and Chester A. Crocker. Washington: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1995.

Comparative Framework

Bryan, Thomas J. "The Revolutionary's Dilemma: From Defensive Necessity to Elite Capture." *Working Paper*, 2025.

Michels, Robert. *Political Parties: A Sociological Study of the Oligarchical Tendencies of Modern Democracy*. 1911. Reprint, New York: Free Press, 1962.

© 2025 Thomas J. Bryan